# Making and Unmaking Memories:
# The Politics of Time in the Contemporary Middle East

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Memory-making and the use of memory is always political, and more visibly so in times of crisis, conflict and transition. The current situation in the Middle East and North Africa is no exception to this, where we have seen history, and specific narratives stemming from it, being mobilised towards certain political goals. In taking time as a distinct analytical category, this special issue aims to show that its explicit consideration transforms the ways in which we understand current political dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa. Both memory and time can be illuminating in drawing connections between the political, the economic and the social, thereby shedding new light on old conflicts on the one hand, and bridging the gap between the political and the social/cultural on the other.[1] As Charles Tilly noted, the politics of memory can tell us about both shared historical experiences and their effects on politics today, as well as the contestation or coercion over interpretations of the past—and present.[2]

Building on a growing field of Middle Eastern memory studies, this special issue uses historical, ethnographic and political economy approaches to ask questions about how time is ordered, how memory is political and/or politicised, and how memory is tied to power at the local, national and international levels. The notion of collective memory has long played a role in our understandings of nation, identity, sovereignty, and conflict.[3] In the Middle East, a body of work looking at social and cultural memory has similarly interrogated how nationalism, politics and resistance are constituted through memory and remembering.[4] Historically, much of this work looked at nationalism as a particular arena of memory-making and the organisation of time.[5]

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[1] Alon Confino (1997) Collective memory and cultural history: Problems of method, *The American historical review*, 102(5), 1386-1403.
[2] Charles Tilly (1994) Afterword: Political Memories in Space and Time, in: Jonathan Boyarin (ed.) *Remapping memory: The politics of timespace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 247.
[3] Benedict Anderson (2006) *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso Books).
[4] Laleh Khalili (2007) *Heroes and martyrs of Palestine: The politics of national commemoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Ussama Makdisi & Paul Silverstein (eds.) (2006) *Memory and violence in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press); Ahmad H. Sa'di (2002) Catastrophe, memory and identity: Al-Nakbah as a component of Palestinian identity, *Israel Studies*, 7(2), pp. 175-198; Andreas Huyssen (2012) *Twilight memories: Marking time in a culture of amnesia* (London: Routledge); Sune Haugbølle (2005) Public and private memory of the Lebanese civil war, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25(1), pp. 191-203.
[5] Jocelyne Dakhlia (2002) *Forgetting History: The Motifs and Contents of Collective Memory in Southern Tunisia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Eric Davis (2005) *Memories of state: Politics, history, and collective identity in modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Adeed Dawisha (2016) *Arab nationalism in the twentieth century: from triumph to despair*

National memories were seen as contested and ridden with power relations, thus marking what Haugbølle and Hastrup call 'the negotiation of national memory'.[6] More recently, work focusing on political memory and violence has looked at narratives of violence and processes of political change.[7] The interdisciplinary nature of this growing field raises questions around definitions of memory as well as analytical approaches to it. As Alon Confino has noted, '[o]nly when linked to historical questions and problems, via methods and theories, can memory be illuminating'.[8] At the same time, this interdisciplinarity renders it an exciting and innovative space from which to approach issues of politics, economy, and society.

This special issue builds on much of the work mentioned above, with a specific focus on the politics of time. It is interested in how memory-making attempts to re-organise time in new ways that challenge political, economic and cultural narratives that have become dominant. Through exploring the ways in which memory structures time, the contributors trace power relations embedded in the construction of everyday events, and how memory is implicated in, and produced by, this. The contributions explore different forms of political work that memory-making does, from the work of haunting to the work of rewriting history.

Alon Confino urges us to move beyond seeing the history of memory as how the past is represented and instead search for why certain pasts are accepted or rejected: 'Every society sets up images of the past. Yet to make a difference in a society, it is not enough for a certain past to be selected. It must steer emotions, motivate people to act, be received; in short, it must become a socio-cultural mode of action. Why is it that some pasts triumph while others fail?'[9] On the one hand, the politics of memory is not simply about political ideologies and their contestation but rather about how political memory is social and cultural. On the other hand, questions of power and contestation are central to the emergence of memories and the political role that they play.

In his excellent piece framing this special issue, Sune Haugbølle sketches out the contours of memory studies in the Middle East. He shows how social memory became a prominent theme in research on the Middle East throughout the 1990s, distinguished by its attention to meaning-making rather than discovering truths; memory studies instead 'Memory studies asks questions about how humans remember and forget the past and the social conditions that structure remembering' (p. 2). The aim is not to produce cohesive theories or frameworks, but rather to

(Princeton: Princeton University Press); Sami Zubaida (2002) The fragments imagine the nation: The case of Iraq, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 34(2), pp. 205-215; Andrew Shryock (1997) *Nationalism and the genealogical imagination: Oral history and textual authority in tribal Jordan* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

[6] Sune Haugbølle & Anders Hastrup (2008) Introduction: Outlines of a new politics of memory in the Middle East. *Mediterranean Politics*, 13(2), p. 138.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Confino, Collective Memory, 1388.

[9] Confino, Collective Memory, 1390.

trace how people and societies construct collective frameworks of thought and action. Haughbolle notes that the question of change and transition in particular has dominated memory studies post-2010/2011: 'Global memory after 2011 also turns the gaze back to previous periods of revolt, dissent and radicalism that historians had previously understudied if not overlooked completely' (p. 7). Telling stories about 'what happened' becomes a way of making meaning and collective memory: a tool of resistance in and of itself.

Some questions that this special issue aims to answer include: what happens when the concept of time as linear and progressive is abandoned? How is political memory both collective and individual, and how does it shape present relationships in society? How do both elites and the subaltern partake in the production and reproduction of political memory and thereby the structuring of political time? How do structures such as capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, racism and others intersect with different versions of political memory around specific events, and how do they exist both in the past and the present? These questions aim to shed light on the complex effects of time on political change, as well as the effects of political change on our understandings of time and how it is structured. To do this, each contributor explores a particular event, process, memory, narrative or collective in order to draw out the connections between political memory and change, probing mainstream narratives and pushing beyond them, so as to assert the transformative potential of political memory in all its multiplicity and radicality. Such an approach also opens up the space for a different conceptualisation of political time, and this is the point of departure for this special issue.

**Exploring time and memory**

In addressing conceptualisations of time and change in the contemporary Middle East, this special issue provides a critique of three major tendencies in the existing literature. first, in discussing the influential literature on the nature, development and transformation of political regimes in the Middle East, the article by Roberto Roccu shows how this is rooted in a linear understanding of time, presented at times as a forward-moving trajectory, at times as cyclical repetition of established patterns, but still 'characterised by measurability and divisibility along the same axis of duration' (p. 7). Combined with a gradual understanding of transition and a liberal-procedural definition of democracy, this literature ends up unduly restricting its analytical focus. In response to this, thinking of political time in ruptural terms, along Gramsci's distinction between time as duration and time as epochal change, can broaden the scope not only of scholarly analysis but also of political praxis. Second, the article by Sara Salem provides an incisive critique of the way in which

periodisation is often constructed, with specific reference to the political economy of postcolonial Egypt. In her analysis of the 'haunting' power of Nasserism as a political and ideological project, she shows how its 'afterlife' inevitably complicates the neat separation between a state-led developmental project under Nasser and a neoliberal one under Sadat. Finally, Nivi Manchanda's article dissects discourses that portray Afghanistan as a 'graveyard of empires', unveiling the Orientalist gaze informing them, which leads to depicting an unconquerable land defended by a people with a 'proclivity to fight without a cause' (p. 6).

The contributions in this special issue make two particular theoretical moves. On the one hand, they highlight the extent to which understandings of political time in the Middle East are shaped from the outside, analytically and practically at once. The analytical dimension also emerges from Alina Sajed's article in this issue, which puts forward a critique of methodological nationalism in a quest to retrieve the importance of translocal solidarity as a defining feature of Third Worldism in independent Algeria. On the other hand, they showcase the complexity of the relation between political time and memory, and more specifically of how perceptions of the former are intimately connected to intersubjective – collective and individual, public and private – memories. While they might not necessarily be concerned directly with political time, all other contributions to this special issue centre on specific forms of memory, and – following Confino – they examine their relevance with reference to specific 'historical questions and problems' to be addressed 'via methods and theories'.

In this regard, a range of critical scholars are mobilised in the individual contributions, from Gramsci to Gordon, from Fanon to Berlant, from Said to Taylor. Beyond their association with critical traditions in their own fields of study, these authors have two key elements in common. Firstly, they are all relational thinkers, and more precisely they share an understanding of relationality characterised by a complex understanding of power. Some contributions, most notably those by Sai Englert and Bassel Salloukh, examine the power of specific elites – respectively in the Israeli Labour Party and among Lebanese Christians – in instrumentalising and manipulating political memory in the pursuit of a specific goal. Power also appears as part of 'the spectacle of politics' in Aya Nassar's analysis of Egypt's 'national symbolic order'. Through the production of urban space in Cairo, we see not only the material effects of power, but also its limitations, as the state-orchestrated solemnity of memorialisation through the Monument to the Unknown Solider is trumped by the chaos and disorder characterising the everyday reality of living the very site of memorialisation. Other contributions instead pay more sustained attention to the structuring effects of capitalism (Roccu), colonialism (Sajed, Salem), and imperialism (Manchanda) on both political time and memory. In line with the relational commitment, this focus on structures

is best understood not as a way of silencing, but rather of 'situating',[10] agency. Crucially, this also enables an exploration of the link between memory, agency, and radical transformation. This is the case for instance of both Sajed' analysis of the lost memory of Third Worldism and Salem's examination of the haunting legacies of Nasserism. Both are deeply shaped by struggles against the colonial order, and highlight the plurality and contestation implicit in remembering and re-membering specific political projects.

Secondly, none of the authors inspiring the individual contributions can really be confined within a single disciplinary field. As a result, this special issue cannot but be characterised by a plurality of methods and methodologies. These include for instance Sajed's 'affirmative critique', which entails 'retriev[ing] forgotten, hidden or invisible acts of critique and movements of resistance by writing about them or by publishing manifestos, letters and poems that testify to critical acts' (p. 1). Such an approach enables Sajed to recover the internationalist and translocal legacy of the anticolonial movement, suffocated in the throes of the antinomies of real-existing anticolonial nationalism, through the writings of three Algerian intellectuals. Cultural production, this time in the form of novels and films, is also central to Salloukh's analysis of the 'sectarian *imaginaire*' in post-civil war Lebanon, and of Nassar's study of one of the monuments symbolising Egypt's 'national symbolic order'. While mainly addressing primary and secondary written sources typically covered in memory studies, the other contributions similarly testify to the interdisciplinary orientation of this special issue, insofar as the analytical angle informing them ranges from political economy to sociology to political history.

**The power(s) of memories**

With respect to the relation between memory and political change, the articles in this special issue can be broadly divided into three themes: memories that haunt, memories that are mobilised, and memories that disturb what we think we know. All three themes address the central question of the role of the past in the present and the future, and what it means to critically interrogate what the past is. The first theme—memory as haunting—takes a particular approach to memory-making that is interested in how past memories seep into the present and future, and why haunting might be a productive way of understanding how time moves. The second theme focuses more on the political role memories play and how they are mobilised by different groups at different times to serve different purposes. Here, the past is not a static set of events that is far gone, but rather a living, breathing 'thing' that is constantly being drawn upon to legitimise the political present. The

[10] Andreas Bieler & Adam D. Morton (2018) *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

third theme interrogates more specifically how memory can be used to challenge dominant temporalities, and attendant conceptions of time, in order to re-imagine political events such as decolonisation and the 2010/2011 Arab revolutions.

*Memories that haunt*

Nassar's paper sketches out the connections between space and the symbolic national imaginary within which we live. By asking how politics—as death and mortality—are navigated and scripted in the city space of Cairo, she traces the links between sovereignty, mundane ordinariness and nationalism. She looks at one monument in particular—the Monument of the Unknown Soldier in Cairo— to demonstrate how one site, in its materiality and entanglements, shows 'state-making' via 'city-making' after 1952 and well into the 1970s. This article highlights the materiality of memory, and the ways in which memories and memory-making are embedded in the very space within which we move. Memory-as-material has played an important role in the propagation of a national order built on post-independence sovereignty, even when monuments are mundane or blend into the ordinariness of the everyday. The monument Nassar focuses on is one through which we can trace the 'ghostly' imaginary of the nation. This relates to the article by Salem that looks back at the same era in modern Egyptian history—the post-1952 era—through the lens of 'ghostly matters'. Discussing Gamal Abdel Nasser's funeral—attended by over five million people—she brings together the material and the symbolic viscerally: 'The iconic images and footage of the funeral do not only show streets being flooded by people, mourners also attached them to the infrastructure of the city. The most widely circulated images show mourners on light poles, lampposts, and utility poles' (pp. 19). Hence, political memories are formed in and through the very infrastructure of the city.

Salem's article on haunting similarly draws on the 'ghosts' of Nasserism. What does it mean to look at the Nasserist moment in Egypt through the lens of haunting? And how can haunting have both destructive and productive effects? Looking at the afterlives of Nasserism, Salem argues that the promises it made—although only partially fulfilled—continued to act as powerful political memories that limited Egyptian politics in the decades that followed. Nasserism-as-haunting traces how political projects, hopes, ideals and demands seep into one another, and how memory is a powerful part of this. Salem argues that viewing Nasserism as haunting allows us to trace the ways it normalised certain ideas around what politics should look like, and what an economic model founded on independent development could deliver. At the same time, Nasserism also haunts us in other ways, primarily through the decimation of the Left, ultimately rendered too weak to counter the neoliberal project that began in the early 1970s. Nasserism is thus contradictory in its

haunting: it placed limits on how fast the neoliberal reforms could be put in place, but it also weakened the very forces that could resist it. Haunting as a form of memory-making thus opens up new ways of thinking about the era of decolonisation in contexts such as Egypt.

Completing this trio of 'haunted essays' is Manchanda's article, which, contesting the popular notion of Afghanistan as the 'graveyard of empires', explores memory-making and history-making through the idea of haunting, seeing Afghanistan as haunting's most natural home. She shows the ways in which Afghanistan is represented as a space of ghosts and spectres; of timelessness; and of dead-ends. Manchanda draws on notions of memory by asking us why Afghanistan is remembered in particular ways: as a place where 'foreign armies go to die', a place in which people are either 'unruly' or seen as possessing an 'unbreakable warrior spirit'. She argues: 'In these images we see haunting fulfil a dual purpose – Afghanistan is made into a haunted place, even as its ghosts and the social violence done to it are continually repressed. Perhaps the mnemonics of the graveyard lie precisely in this self-negating *double entendre* – our construction of Afghanistan as a graveyard, as a space for ghosts allows us to avoid reckoning with these very ghosts' (p. 10). Through selective evocation of past memory on the one hand, and calculated forgetting on the other, Afghanistan is repeatedly represented as an obstinate part of the world. This is only one effect of remembering in particular ways.

*Memories that mobilise*

How is memory mobilised and how is it intended to mobilise? Salloukh's paper explores 'war memory' through the politics of contestation in post-war Lebanon. How does the post-war present remain 'hostage' to the past, and how does the war continue to shape political and communal perceptions of the present? Salloukh shows the ways in which memory is deployed by contending groups as a way of controlling the present, as a monopoly over history and truth. In other words, the usage of memory can be seen as a 'spillover of wartime animosities into the post-war era, and their continuation by other means' (pp. 1). Following Haugbølle, Salloukh also distinguishes between public and private memory, arguing that whereas public memory takes place in the national public sphere, private memory is more intimate and not always geared towards reconciliation. As a result, conflict might well arise between state-sanctioned public memory, or amnesia as in the case of the Lebanese civil war, and the private but shared memory of specific communities. This tension is explored in explored in the article through particular political events, such as the 2018 parliamentary elections, as well as cultural forms such as novels and films. A complex foray into questions that are personal, communal and political, the article raises important questions about how societies remember once a conflict has ended.

Englert's article, 'The Rise of Israeli 'Fascism' and the Mythologizing of the Labour Zionist Past,' also looks at the ways in which memories are mobilised. He argues, '[a]s much as the past is fought over in the present, that same present is the outcome of particular struggles over the interpretation of the past' (pp. 1). Looking at the growing discourse about the 'emergence' of Israeli fascism, Englert problematises the idea of a recent rupture that has newly produced fascism in Israel. Instead, he argues that such arguments are mobilised by the Labour Zionist camp in order to unify opposition in the contemporary political conjuncture. Englert also asks what making these claims means vis-à-vis the past, showing that in the process of mobilising discourses of Israeli fascism as new, Labour Zionism seeks to present its own history as devoid of the violence and excesses found in the right-wing actors identified as fascist. This allows Labour Zionists to present the exclusion, violence, and expropriation directed towards Palestinians as something new, a radical break that suggests the rise of fascism rather than anything that is and has been part and parcel of Israeli history.

While both predicated on an underlying feeling of present marginalisation, rooted respectively in the post-war institutional arrangement in Lebanon and in electoral defeat in Israel, different mechanisms are at play in these instrumentalisations of memories of the past for present political gains. On the one hand, Christian elites have sought to challenge the civil war taboo in the Lebanese public memory. In doing so, they have stimulated and cultivated a memory of the past that is simultaneously collective, insofar as shared by many Christian communities in Lebanon, and highly divisive as it builds on and reinforces sectarian divides, and their associated 'solitudes', across Lebanese society. On the other hand, Englert shows how induced amnesia and erasure are actively encouraged within the Labour Zionist camp to 'exceptionalise' the current political conjuncture in Israel, in order to artificially augment the distance between an alleged progressive, liberal and democratic Zionism of the Labour-dominated past and the exclusionary, illiberal and authoritarian Zionism of the present.

*Memories that disturb*

Although more directly focused on the notion of time, Roccu's contribution explores the links between 'democratisation', transition and capitalist time. What does it mean to take seriously the idea of time and temporality as connected to capitalism? In what ways does the literature on political regimes in the Middle East emphasise linearity and continuity over discontinuity and rupture? Gramsci's theory of history is then presented as opening up a space for us to explore how elements of the past appear—in different semblances—in the present, and how world historical conditions are part and parcel of this. Roccu writes, 'as much as it sounds daunting, recasting

transition as rupture, as a fleeting moment for transcending the temporality of capitalism, promises to create the room for the individual and collective emancipation of subaltern classes across the Middle East' (pp. 16). Insofar as it severely restricts the way in which political time, transition and democracy are understood, but it also simultaneously shapes the dominant understanding of politics in the region, the political regimes literature overlooks the potential for ruptural change, despite its contemporary relevance in the wake of the 2010-11 uprisings. These openings are the ones that an approach based on Gramsci's theory of history is better placed to address.

Sajed's paper similarly asks us to confront what we think we know about certain political events. She examines Third Worldism as a political ideology through the lens of three Algerian intellectuals from the 1950s – 1960s. She asks us what it would mean to revisit Third Worldism and see it not only as an example of anti-imperialist ideology, but also – through the methodology of affirmative critique outlined above – as a practice of translocal solidarity. Such an approach opens up spaces for engaging with alternative memories of Third Worldism, that in turn re-tell the narrative of decolonization in a way that overcomes the strictures of methodological nationalism. Radicalizing memory also serves to centre decolonization as a major event of the 20th century, through which it can act as a 'latent ideal of unfulfilled potential,' similar to the claims made in Salem's article. Radical re-tellings of this particular historical moment can shed new light on old questions, and show us different ways of thinking about decolonization today.

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